

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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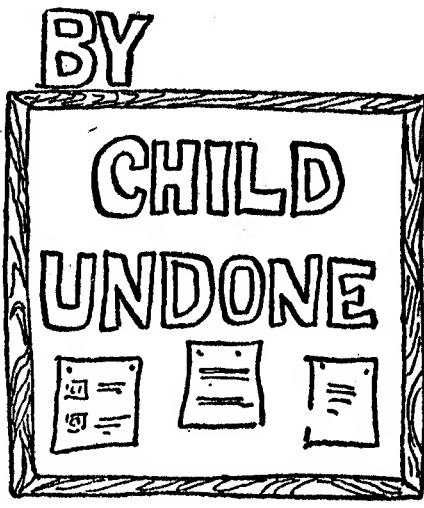
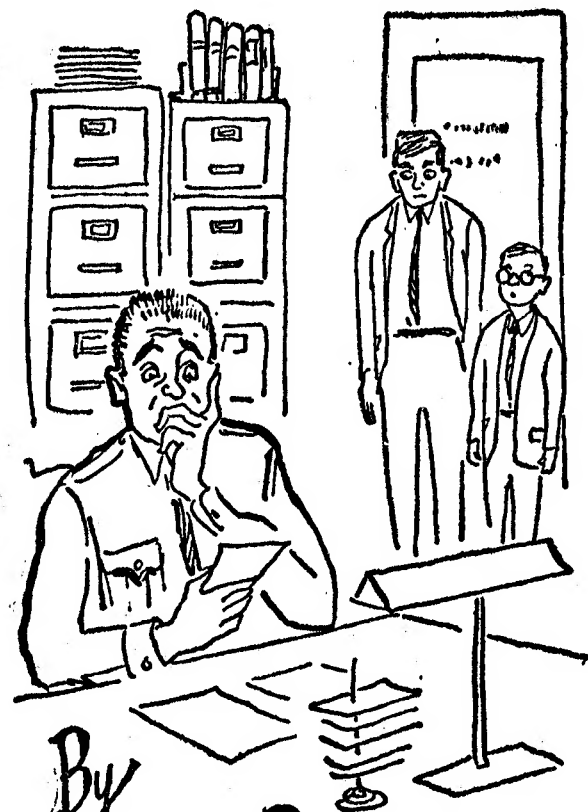
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It seems that modern sources of information have not entirely displaced the academic, after all.



By
Jack Ritchie

back and died almost immediately.

George Clinton died the next night in an equally direct fashion.

Our Police Department receives a number of letters every day—some offering information or seeking it, others obscene, some threatening, some rambling tirades. A great many of them, to be truthful, we drop into the wastebasket. We simply do not have the personnel or the budget to follow through on everything that comes through the mail. There are some messages, however, which do command our attention.

IT WAS well past midnight when Henry Wilson returned home after a late show. As he inserted the key into the lock of his apartment door, he was shot once through the

This was one. The envelope and notepaper were of an ordinary type which can be purchased at any of a thousand stationery departments. The message was typewritten, without salutation, and unsigned. It had been received by the commissioner's office earlier in the day and forwarded to my department for action. It read:

On the supposition that any organization as large as yours might inadvertently overlook the matter, I suggest that you compare the bullets which killed Henry Wilson and George Clinton.

I believe you will find that they were fired from the same gun.

I looked up at Detective Sergeant Harrison. "Well?"

He nodded. "It checks out. The same gun."

"I presume you had the lab go over this letter for fingerprints?"

"Sure, but nothing. Just Millie's prints. The commissioner didn't touch it."

Millie Tyler is the commissioner's secretary. She opens and pre-reads his official mail, so when it becomes necessary to forward a letter from his office to the fingerprint department, Millie's invariably appear on the paper. The technicians in the laboratory claim to be able to recognize her prints

on sight, and we grant them that.

I drummed my fingers lightly on the desk. "If the writer of this note knew that the bullets came from the same gun, the question is obvious. Why?"

"I have a sneaking suspicion."

"So have I, especially since he took the pains not to forward his fingerprints. Did Clinton and Wilson know each other?"

"As far as we've been able to find out, they never even saw each other in their lives. There's just one thing common to the both of them. They were members of the American Legion."

I looked out of the window.

Harrison cleared his throat. "I'm sure we'll come up with something more than that, sir."

As long as we were stuck at that point, I asked, "Did they both belong to the same post?"

"No. They lived on opposite sides of the city."

"But at least they attended the same war?"

"No. Clinton was a World War II vet and Wilson a Korean."

I picked up the report on the first victim, Henry Wilson.

Henry Wilson had been a bachelor, thirty-eight; bookkeeper with a construction firm, steady worker. Not particularly extrovert in conversation, but he did belong to four weekly bowling leagues. Saved

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his money, but wasn't fanatic about it, worth around six thousand in a savings account. Had twenty thousand in insurance, ten of which was G.I. and the other ten with a private firm. The beneficiaries were half a dozen charitable organizations.

"Was he a nut on charities?"

"No," Harrison said. "According to the people who knew him, Wilson took out the insurance policies early in his life because they were good buys. Low rates, you know. He figured that if he got married he could always change the beneficiaries."

"But evidently he didn't. Any matrimonial prospects or rejects?"

"None that we've run across so far. I guess he preferred bowling."

I turned to the file on George Clinton.

Age, forty-six; veteran of Second World War; vice-president of Madison Avenue advertising agency. Divorced in 1963; wife and two teen-aged daughters promptly returned to the state of Washington where her parents still lived.

Clinton drank heavily, but evidently kept it under control during working hours. Had a trigger temper. According to an associate, Clinton engaged in a fist fight with a customer at a downtown bar three days before he was shot.

He lived alone, his body found

in apartment near door. Neighbor says he heard something that *might* have been a shot at one in the morning, but wasn't sure enough to bother the police.

"What about this fist-fight thing?" I asked.

"We're looking for him. The bartender says he drops in occasionally, but he doesn't know the guy's name or anything about him. You know how it is in those crowded downtown bars. The faces get familiar, but there's nothing worth remembering except a man's favorite drink."

I put Clinton's file in the Out tray. "So we're left riding two tiny parallels. Both victims belonged to the American Legion, and they lived alone."

"And they were both men."

"Thank you," I said.

"Well, that could be important, you know."

Late that afternoon, Sergeant Harrison came back to my office. "The bartender just called and said that the customer who had the fight with Clinton is in the place right now working on a whiskey sour."

"Has it occurred to you to pick him up?"

"I already sent somebody," Harrison said. "They'll bring him in."

I told my secretary, Sue Adams, where I'd be and we took the

elevator down to the interrogation rooms.

Fifteen minutes later, two detectives brought in a man in his early thirties. He was neatly dressed, though at the moment he was perspiring and his hair was a bit disturbed and moist. He informed us that he was the junior partner of Polk & Polk, Certified Public Accountants.

"Honest," he said, "I never even saw this Clinton before."

"Then what was the argument about?" I asked.

"There was no argument. I mean no talk at all. I guess he had a lot of drinks in him and he bumped into me on his way to the cigarette machine or something. I said, 'Watch it', and the next thing I knew, he swung at me and it went like that."

"You didn't know who he was?"

"I swear. Not until one of those detectives told me."

"Where were you at one a.m. Tuesday?"

"At home. In bed asleep. My wife will vouch for that. She's a light sleeper and very jealous. I couldn't go anywhere without her knowing."

When I got to the office Thursday after lunch, Sue Adams informed me that the commissioner had received another letter and that it now lay on the desk in my office.

I unfolded the notepaper carefully, anchored it open with a ruler, and read:

Reading the newspapers, I see that you have definitely established that one gun killed both Clinton and Wilson. Good for you.

The revolver belongs to me and I intend to use it again.

I sent for Sergeant Harrison. He read the message and pursed his lips. "It's not signed."

I studied him.

He flushed. "I wasn't expecting him to sign his real name, but you sort of expect to see something like 'The Avenger.'"

"How do we know it's a 'he'?"

"We don't," Harrison admitted, "but somehow I just can't picture a woman writing notes like this. I guess I'm an incurable romantic."

"Take this letter to the lab and see if there are any fingerprints besides Millie's."

There were none.

The third man to die was William A. Wheeler, musician and music teacher.

I was routed from my bed at three in the morning—and so was Harrison for that matter—by the call from headquarters. Half an hour later, I joined Harrison and we stared down at the pajama-clad body of William A. Wheeler.

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tion," Harrison said, "the buzzer got him out of bed at two in the morning. Wheeler left the chain on the door when he opened it, but that didn't help any. As soon as it was open a few inches, the murderer fired."

The photographer finished and two ambulance attendants put Wheeler's body on a stretcher and covered it.

Harrison continued. "The man in the next apartment was hunched over hot milk trying to beat insomnia and heard the shot. He didn't jump up right away, but thought it over before he decided that it just might have been a shot, though it wasn't anywhere near as loud as the ones on television. So

he peeked down the hall and there he saw Wheeler's hand sticking out of the partly opened door. Didn't see any signs of the killer though, and he phoned the police right away."

I looked about the apartment. It was rather cluttered. I noticed some small trophies on one of the shelves of a bookcase and examined them. They had been earned by Wheeler while a member of the swimming team at Jefferson High in 1946 and 1947.

"What do we know about Wheeler?" I asked.

"Nothing yet," Harrison said, "except that he's thirty-six."

At ten-thirty that morning Millie Tyler, the commissioner's secretary,



BY CHILD UNDONE

brought an unopened envelope to my office. "This came in the commissioner's mail and it looks like another one of those letters. I'm almost beginning to recognize the style of typing."

I opened the envelope, carefully extracted the note, and read:

I trust that by the time you receive this you will have found the body of Wheeler?

Are you perhaps thinking that I detest the human race so much that I kill indiscriminately?

You are only half right.

I do not kill indiscriminately.

I wondered about the swift mail service until I studied the envelope again. The letter was postmarked at eight the previous evening, six hours before Wheeler had been killed.

I sent the letter on to the lab and it was returned to me just before Harrison came into my office.

Harrison read it and shook his head. "He's crazy."

"We all are," I said, "only at different times."

"And confident. I mean, mailing the letter six hours before he kills the man. Any fingerprints?"

"None at all," I said. "Not even Millie's."

Harrison opened his notebook. "About William A. Wheeler: he played the clarinet, gave class

lessons under the city's musical development program, and took private pupils on the side. One of the rooms of his apartment is sound-proofed."

"What about friends, acquaintances and so forth?"

"The normal number. We're checking them out. Wheeler had two brothers, one's a dentist and the other operates a drugstore. Wheeler spent two years in the army during the Korean War with various post and regimental bands, including overseas."

"I suppose he was a member of the American Legion?"

"No. Veterans of Foreign Wars. But that's still a service organization. He was a swimmer in high school. Got some trophies."

I worried my pipe. "What the devil connects Wilson, Clinton, and Wheeler? Do we have anything that goes across the board? No matter how trivial?"

Harrison ticked off a series. "They were all men, they lived alone in apartments, they were single or divorced, they were all former servicemen and members of a veterans' organization, they were killed in the early hours of the morning, they all had brown hair and they all could swim. I checked up on that last thing after I saw Wheeler's trophies."

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that all of them inhaled and exhaled from time to time, and they were notorious for having their features fixed at the front of their heads."

Harrison was mildly reproving. "You told me you wanted anything connecting them, no matter how small it was."

I conceded. "Did Wheeler carry insurance?"

"Ten thousand, G.I. insurance; one thousand allocated for burial expenses, and nine thousand to his mother. She's widowed, on social security, and lives in an apartment over her son Albert's drugstore. You don't suppose she killed him for the policy?"

"Of course not."

Harrison was faintly dubious. "How can you be so positive about that? I know it's unnatural, but mothers do sometimes murder their children."

"But not after they've grown up."

He rubbed his jaw. "You know, I never realized that before. Makes you stop and think," and he stopped and thought a while.

The next morning Sue Adams greeted me as I came to work. "This time the letter's addressed directly to you instead of the commissioner. I opened it along with your other mail. It's on your desk now."

In my office I examined the en-

velope for a moment. It had been mailed early yesterday evening.

Dear Captain Hayes,

I address you directly since the papers mention that you are in immediate charge of this case. I assume that you have found victim number four?

I feel a great deal like the race driver who knows that taking a curve at 75 miles an hour will result in catastrophe. And yet he attempts to round it at 74 miles an hour . . . and then 74.5 . . . and then 74.6. To come ever closer without disaster becomes the joy of the game.

How many dare I kill before you learn to anticipate me?

Perhaps I will kill one too many.

I got Sue Adams on the intercom. She gets to work a half hour before I do and is usually briefed on the night's happenings.

"Sue, why didn't you tell me that they found number four?"

"I don't think they have," she said. "At least I haven't heard anything. There were two homicides last night, but they were husband and wife affairs, one a hammer job and the other knife. Not what we're looking for, is it, Captain?"

When I returned from lunch at one, Sue had been fretting impatiently. "They found number four,

I think. Harrison left fifteen minutes ago and he's probably there by now." She handed me a slip of paper with an address on it.

When my driver left me off, I walked up to a small cottage set back on the lot in a tree-shaded older part of the city.

"His name's Fairbanks," Harrison said. "Charles W. Fairbanks, but the neighbors called him Charley. Age 72, widower, no children. Retired and living alone on social security and a pension."

I looked down at the body on the kitchen floor. Charley Fairbanks had been shot through the right temple.

Harrison continued. "The doctor estimates that he died between one and three a.m., give or take. Anyway, nobody in the neighborhood remembers hearing the shot. At that time of night everybody's usually asleep. I guess that's why the murderer chooses that time to strike."

"Brilliant deduction."

"It looks like Fairbanks was sitting here at the kitchen table having a cup of coffee."

"Between one and three in the morning?"

"He lived alone so he made his own hours. When he felt like drinking a cup of coffee, he drank it. Anyway, the murderer stood right outside and fired through

the window screen beside him."

"Who found his body?"

"His niece. I talked to her a little. Being that Fairbanks lived alone and because of his age, she phones him every day at about noon. This noon he didn't answer so she came over to see if anything was wrong."

"What about insurance?"

"Only a two thousand dollar policy and the niece is his beneficiary, but it's understood that she pays his funeral expenses. Also he owns this cottage and that goes to her too." After a few moments of silence, Harrison sighed. "Fairbanks couldn't swim a damn stroke."

I looked at Harrison.

He cleared his throat. "I mean that there goes another one of our connecting links. About all the victims being able to swim, you know? And not only that, what hair Fairbanks had was gray and before that red. So that also shoots our theory about them all having brown hair."

I looked out of the window. "Stop using the word 'our'."

Harrison was not yet defeated. "But at least he spent two weeks in an army camp outside of Lincoln, Nebraska, and then World War I ended. Been a loyal member of the American Legion since it was founded in 1919."

Harrison nodded to himself. "So we still got this: they were all men,

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they lived alone, they were all former servicemen and members of a veterans' organization."
I took a deep breath. "Are you really happy with that?"
Victim number five met his death between two and three a.m. the next morning. We were able to pinpoint the time of death because he had been a night watchman and was required to punch the clock hourly. When he failed to do so at three, the Merchant Police responded automatically and found his body lying inside the heavy wire fence enclosing the Hum-

phrey Tool and Die Company.
At nine that morning I had the personal effects of the victim on my desk. I read the information on his driver's license. "Richard M. Johnson. Born 1912. That makes him 54."
Harrison seemed shaken at the report we'd just gotten from the lab. "But Johnson can't be number five. It doesn't fit our pattern."
"But the bullet does," I said. "It came from the same gun that killed the others."
"Johnson was never in the army, the navy, the marines, or even the

BY CHILD UNDONE

coast guard," Harrison said a bit plaintively. "Double hernia and classified 4-F. And he didn't live alone either. He had a wife and two grown children who boarded with him."

I put my hand on his shoulder. "That happens sometimes. Did you really have your heart set on those veterans' organizations?"

He nodded. "Now the only thing tying the victims together is the fact that they were men and there are millions of those." He frowned thoughtfully. "They weren't murdered in alphabetical order, were they?"

I am ashamed to admit that I had momentarily considered that too. "No," I said testily, "they weren't."

Harrison rubbed his jaw. "I don't think the murderer's insane at all."

"Why not?"

"Well . . . I know it's insane to kill people in that chain letter style, but that's not really his *type* of insanity. He just wants us to *think* that there's a mad killer running around loose. He's got an understandable motive for killing at least *one* of his victims, but he prefers to have us running around looking for a mass murderer instead of examining each case individually and coming up with an answer that would hurt him."

There are times when I have the feeling that I underestimate the intelligence of some of my associates. Not often, but it is there.

"All right," I said, "and which one of the victims is his real prey?"

"I don't know," Harrison said. "Maybe he hasn't even gotten around to him yet."

At ten that evening I was still in my office. I was tired and hungry and wanted to go home to a hot bath, but the fact that someone else would be dead by tomorrow morning kept me going over and over everything we had on the murders.

The door to my office clicked open and Sergeant Harrison and his somewhat owlsh ten-year-old son, William, entered. They both seemed rather formally dressed and Harrison explained: "Just got through with the Father and Son Banquet at the Y.M.C.A. Thought I'd drop in and see if there was anything new?"

"There isn't," I said and stared morosely at the sheet of paper on my desk.

1. Henry Wilson
2. George Clinton
3. William A. Wheeler
4. Charles W. Fairbanks
5. Richard M. Johnson

I became aware of Harrison's son at my elbow. "Well," I said somewhat irritably, "do they mean

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He pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose. "Sure, Captain Hayes. They were all vice-presidents of the United States."

I regarded him stonily for nearly twenty seconds and then rose and went to the nearest set of encyclopedias.

William was correct.

I immediately recalled all off-duty detectives, sat down at the city directory, and began assigning stake-outs.

One of them—outside the mansion of the very rich Mr. William A. King—apprehended King's nephew and only heir as the young man prepared to put a bullet through his sleeping uncle's skull.

Mr. King's namesake had served as vice-president under Franklin Pierce.

I held a small coffee and cake celebration in my office.

"I think it's a little unfair of the murderer," Sue Adams said. "Who in the world is expected to remember vice-presidents? Now if they had been the names of our presidents, I would have gotten

suspicious right away. Everybody knows our presidents."

Sergeant Benjamin Harrison cut a piece of chocolate cake and handed it to his son, William Henry. "At first I thought the murderer might be that certified public accountant with Polk & Polk."

Millie Tyler put sugar into her coffee. "You mean the one who slugged it out with that vice-president with the advertising firm on Madison Avenue? Well, frankly, at the time I thought it might be his wife, but then she had this alibi about being in the state of Washington."

Sue Adams had a one-track mind. "If he'd just mentioned somebody like Jefferson or Lincoln."

I rubbed my jaw thoughtfully and tried to think back. Now that she mentioned it, it seemed to me that. . . .

The Commissioner opened the office door. "We're making out a citation for you, Captain. I keep forgetting your first name."

"Rutherford," I said. "Rutherford B. Hayes."



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